TIP of the SPEAR

Looking Back on Looking Back: James "Yaki" Sayles and Organizing Politics Underground

by Revolutionary Intercommunalism Research Group

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with whatever weapons at hand

Authoritarianism is spreading across the globe. As the cost of living increases and ecological collapse displaces communities worldwide, the urgency to struggle against injustices and inequalities becomes ever more pressing. So too does the state's need to crush protest movements and organizers, to control, surveil, and demoralize entire populations. Disruptive protest movements and urban rebellions have not stymied this dynamic in the least, despite drawing in billions of people across the world. In some cases, national rulers and corporate oligarchs panic under the weight of social anger, prompting police and military leaders to take on greater responsibilities in governing daily life.

In light of all of this, the need for better organization is becoming clear to many people who have participated in protests, riots, and uprisings in the past years. But debates over what kind of organization are as central to radical and revolutionary movements as the goals and visions they espouse. This debate is not new. In the 20th century, subversive groups coordinated their efforts according to their platforms and theories of change. From their ideology emerged their theories of organization, tactics, and strategy. Today, things are a bit different.

Protest movements in the u.s. have grown and sharpened since the 2009 riots in Oakland, California, following the murder of Oscar Grant III by Oakland police officer Johannes Mehserle. In each wave of resistance, loosely organized groups—friends, neighbors, students, anarchists, and spontaneity-oriented Marxists—have overcome ideological, tactical, and political hurdles in the heat of struggle. Together, these movements have brought tens of millions into the streets. Protest movements and riots have forced the ruling classes to alter their policies and plans, pushing them

further toward authoritarianism as they remain unwilling or unable to cave to the pressures from the popular rage below.

Participants in Occupy Wall Street or the 2013 Justice for Trayvon Martin protests may not have had a clear ideological direction or strategy. Today, millions of people have a much sharper understanding of the world—and what is needed to change it. Even Donald Trump has ascended to power by rebranding the Republic Party as a force of destabalization, rebelliousness, and rule-breaking. While the insurrectionists of decades past focused largely on tactical escalation, pitting the committed against the faint-hearted within movements, today, several competing currents are vying for prominence within society, and they are willing to take increasingly dire risks to do so.

Within these left-wing currents—abolitionist, anarchist, communist, and democratic-socialist, the four most influental—there are obvious similarities, but also sharp political and strategic differences. Some of these currents differ more from themselves than from others. To understand how, we must look at the organizational theories that have emerged from these tendencies. We also have to appreciate that these are not hermetically-sealed groups. The liberatory movements of the last 15 years have produced a large area of activity and subversion, and the theories of those who populate this "area" often overlap: abolitionists with anarchist organizational models, anarchists with communist theories, democratic socialists with abolitionist ideas, and so on.

While much can be said about specific practices—decision-making, note-taking, facilitation, membership—we'll focus on how these organizations relate to non-members, to acquiantances, and to strangers.

fronts. In such a context, tasks shaped by social strife, class conflict, and possibly civil war will be necessary. We must focus on building emancipatory communities, infrastructures, unions—and eventually entire regions. A revolutionary organization dedicated to fighting class domination and the state must be built, distinct from the specific needs of a collective, union, or affinity group.

Attempts to form an "open" revolutionary party or federation are drawn from a troubled, ultimately doomed history. The state will not allow activist listservs, Instagram personalities, NGO staffers, or elected steering committees to overthrow the most unequal society in history. Leaders will be rounded up, members scattered. The organization will struggle to reconstitute itself in secrecy, as morale will be low and panic high. We do not believe we can persuade those invested in publicity to change course. But those of us who operate under the radar, maintaining political independence, should focus on building mass revolutionary federations and networks—groups dedicated not just to activism or propaganda, but to revolutionary strategy—in secrecy.

One person can carry out an assassination, but they are unlikely to escape alive or free. A small group can break someone out of prison, but they cannot liberate all the cages or destroy the facility. 500 people can vandalize a shopping center, but they cannot topple a police department. An unruly crowd can destroy a police station, but they cannot defeat the National Guard. In revolution, the oppressed will rise up to do all of this—and much more. They will seize warehouses, farmland, and factories, demolish penitentiaries and courthouses, dismantle barracks, take over media stations, collectivize resources. These tasks will unfold over months or years, in parallel to the capitalist state which will unleash terror and misinformation against the revolutionaries. The two forces will compete for influence in the same cities, the same neighborhoods. Anyone who believes in revolution must admit that specific structures are necessary to facilitate participation and action on this scale. When the streets are lined with tanks and barbed wire, when helicopters hover overhead and snipers line rooftops, improvisation will be difficult.

Rebuild the underground!

Revolutionary Intercommunalism Research Group

"conductors," "stations," and "stockholders," based on their respective responsibilities. Their clandestine network helped over 100,000 escape to freedom.

Looking Forward

For anarchists and other anti-authoritarians, organizing collectives, media projects, and even mutual aid initiatives under relative anonymity and secrecy comes almost naturally. This stems partly from the regular cycle of repression within anarchist spaces and partly from political reasoning. Anarchists oppose authority, figureheads, and representatives. As a result, even groups with relatively open membership models rarely have spokespeople. The leadership dynamic that spokespeople represent is believed to breed undesirable power imbalances within groups and movements. While this approach has benefits, it also carries a cost—many anarchist groups remain deeply misunderstood by the public.

In contrast, most radical groups from other theoretical traditions openly reject clandestinity. Meeting notes are shared on Google Docs, internal conversations take place on Slack. Press releases carry real names, and members regularly post from their social media accounts. Spokespeople give speeches without any attempt to obscure their identities or affiliations. This transparency has benefits but also drawbacks. Many radical groups become deeply invested in lawfulness due to their constant exposure to surveillance. Repression never even enters the picture, because these groups often restrain their political imagination to law-abiding means alone.

For those accustomed to organizing anti-repression groups, mutual aid committees, publishing projects, or small affinity groups, the principle of mass clandestinity can be difficult to grasp. Are they "above ground" when distributing fliers to the families of prisoners? Are they "clandestine" because they operate closed collectives with no legal identities attached?

Similarly, it may be hard for those involved in "mass" organizations to understand what they stand to gain from protecting their members' identities—and what they risk by failing to do so.

We believe forming collectives and organizing groups, as is common in anarchist networks, is important. Working with undocumented people, prisoners, anti-fascists, and abortion access groups is essential. But this approach alone is insufficient for a revolutionary struggle. It allows people to accomplish specific tasks, often well. But in times of heightened social polarization and crisis, it can't address society's broader needs. A social revolution requires a guiding orientation for specific projects and

Mass Organizations: The primary goal of most groups, though often unrealized, is to create mass public organizations—"aboveground" groups with open membership, visible offices, websites, and accessible criteria for joining. The goal here is growth, reaching as many people as possible. In the midst of spontaneous upheaval, groups organized around this model use the opportunity to recruit. They are generally not the groups to spearhead or agitate for militant action, as their members' identities and infrastructure are easily accessible and therefore at a higher risk of repression. Moreover, recruiting a large number of people incentivizes organizers to appeal to popular interests and concerns, which are shaped by the status quo. This group risks becoming reformist. If it can resist the pressure to compromise, so the theory goes, they stand a great chance at influencing the direction of an uprising or even a revolution.

Collectives: Some groups prefer to stay small, public, with closed or hard-to-attain membership. Their ideas and activities are clear and visible, but their operations remain tightly controlled. Their focus is on precision and commitment. Their membership is often well-known to their community, but more or less secret or unpublicized.

This type of organization typically provides logistical support, media operations, and technical aid to struggles. Movements could not take place without them. Truly, they are the backbone of protest camps, demonstrations, jail support, and countless direct-action networks. While they sometimes lead, it's not usually their intent. They prefer to work within an "ecology" of efforts, specializing in a few tasks. Because they do not usually vie for influence over the political and strategic direction of the movement they support, their efforts are vulnerable to recuperation, as other forces shamelessly take control of struggles.

Affinity Groups: Particularly favored by anarchists, these groups are clandestine, small, and often invisible. They have no known membership, no clear entry points, no offices, and typically no reliable means of contact. Their goal is safety, agility, and effectiveness.

At high points in struggle, this form of organization is often associated with a strategy of "decentralized autonomy" or "diversity of tactics." When many such groups come together, they do not usually directly collaborate on specific plans. Instead, they respect each other's freedom and security to pursue their own initiatives, confident that their actions align with the movement's overall political goals. Due to their clandestine nature, these groups can employ militant methods safely, but generally at the cost of losing touch with a broader base of potential recruits or direct support.

Struggles cannot do without groups like this. Still, affinity groups cannot by themselves lead, expand, defend, or accomplish all of the goals a liberatory movement may set for itself.

Aboveground/underground coalition: There is a growing desire to link aboveground and underground forms and styles of organizing. Some hope to create movements that can utilize separate strategies, based in different ideas of change, all linked together. The groups in this framework operate separately—aboveground groups work in the public sphere, while underground activists carry out direct action away from public scrutiny. Although it did not start out this way, this is somewhat similar to how the Stop Cop City movement operated. There are probably countless examples in, for instance, the so-called "anti-globalization movement" of the '90s and early '00s of this arrangement as well. This mode aims to involve large numbers in visible work while keeping clandestine aspects intact.

When the same people fill both aboveground and underground roles, the movement is vulnerable—easy to infiltrate, attack, and monitor. Split the roles, and division could follow. Logistically, the tasks are different and require different skills. Ideologically, the challenges confronting each group demand different considerations. Functionally, the aboveground group may operate legally—solely handling media, fundraising, and recruitment. But if they are repressed, the underground is left exposed, without a rearguard to nurture it.

While this approach may seem practical, it risks fusing the three models improperly. It combines both the strengths and, more importantly, the weaknesses of each. History shows that, despite its appeal, this approach doesn't always deliver the desired outcomes.

In this essay, we will argue for the necessity of building movements and organizations based on the principle of mass clandestinity: groups that are both large and secretive. These movements would have no visible membership, no known leaders, and no headquarters. Nevertheless, they would be able to recruit new members and cultivate many forms of participation. Rooted in secrecy, they would have the strength and scope of a mass phenomenon, not just of a collective, specific project, or affinity group.

To support this argument, we will analyze the Black Liberation Army and an essay by New Afrikan former prisoner of war James "Yaki" Sayles. We will also explore the global context behind the theories and strategies of the BLA, specifically by focusing on the "foco theory" in Latin Amerika and its long global influence.

movement or organization be secret if everyone knows about it? If it operates in the shadows, how can it be participatory? According to conventional thinking, these ideas cannot coexist. By certain standards, they are outright contradictions.

The Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional (EZLN), or the Zapatistas, offer a powerful example of a large, secretive organization—an underground mass movement. Campesinos, teachers, guerrillas, spokespeople, and entire support networks operate in the shadows, intricately woven into the fabric of Chiapas' Mayan society. Thousands gather for meetings, dances, and markets, all while masked in balaclavas, their true identities concealed within a complex web of social ties.

The Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional (FSLN), or Sandinistas, followed a similar path. Their approach to organizing allowed union leaders, student activists, poets, saboteurs, and rural guerrillas to sustain a decade-long guerrilla war with only a few hundred members. Their strength lay in their ability to seamlessly integrate new participants, bringing thousands into their ranks throughout 1978 alone.

The Provisional Irish Republican Army (IRA, or Provos) coordinated around 10,000 volunteers in Belfast alone during the late '60s and early '70s. Confronting the full force of British colonial terrorism and paramilitary violence, membership in their ranks was kept entirely secret. Restaurants, grocery stores, churches, bars, and apartment complexes became hidden meeting places where the movement thrived in the shadows.

The Underground Railroad offers another example. More a network than an actual organizaiton, this secretive web of relations allowed Afrikan slaves to escape from plantations across the South, relying on a vast conspiratorial system dedicated to ending human bondage. Comprised mostly of free Black people and white abolitionists, the Underground Railroad connected drivers, churches, safe houses, lawyers, farmers, and armed insurgents. Members identified themselves as "agents,"

unrest in Miami following the 1979 killing of Arthur McDuffie by the police. The 1981 uprising in Wilmington. Justice for Eugene Walker riots in Chicago in 1983...

If we include self-organized wildcat labor resistance—like the Atlanta Mead Corporation strike (1972), the Kentucky Brookside Mine strike (1973), or the Detroit Dodge wildcat strike (1974)—the list could go on for many pages. The uprisings didn't stop, and many continued into the 1980s and '90s.

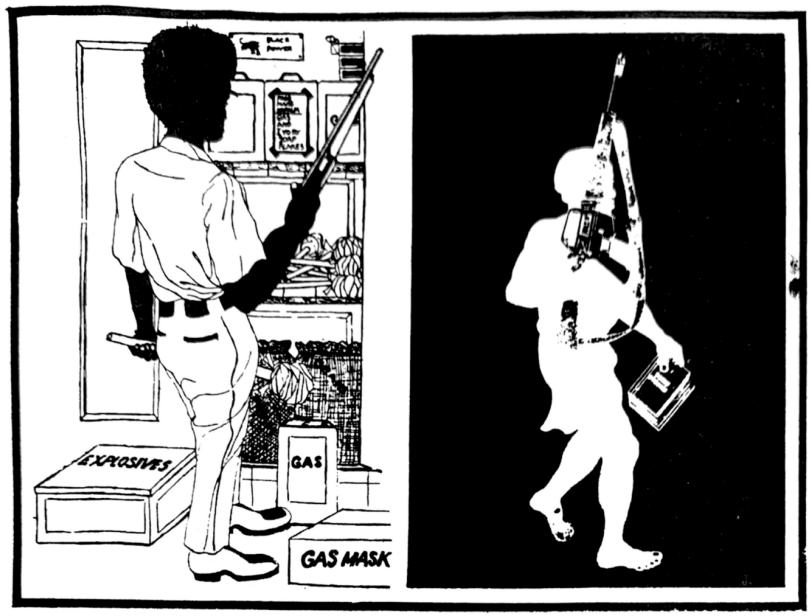
The BLA, along with their contemporaries, failed to connect with the popular tactics of subversion, isolating themselves from the very people they needed to build a revolutionary organization. This mistake cannot be repeated.

Revolutionaries today must recognize the necessity of engaging with mass acts of spontaneous unrest. Whether riots, strikes, blockades, or occupations, these eruptions of popular resistance are critical moments when people take their struggle directly into the streets. Revolutionaries must be humbly linked to these actions—not merely as supporters but as active participants, helping to shape the course of uprisings and pushing them toward revolutionary goals. The clandestine organization, both political and "military," must remain accountable to the forces of popular insurrection and unrest. The revolutionary organization—mass yet secret, popular yet covert—finds its true purpose only in streets choked with tear gas, littered with bricks and broken glass, cars overturned, and helicopters buzzing overhead.

Toward a Mass Clandestinity

The central argument of "On What It Means to 'Rebuild': Looking Back" is that the entire revolutionary movement must be rebuilt in secrecy. Yaki stresses that armed struggle cannot be separated from political struggle, and vice versa. Many, perhaps most, veterans of the BLA, the BPP, and similar formations have concluded that their primary failure stemmed from inadequately separating legal from illegal fronts or activities. In his brief yet informative history of the BPP, Sundiata Acoli summarizes this position succinctly: "There should have been a clear separation between the above-ground Party and the underground armed apparatus." This idea is gaining traction once again—but it is mistaken. It misdiagnoses the political problems confronting militant resistance. The revolution cannot succeed by relying on anonymous guerrilla cells or affinity groups. It cannot be led by spokespersons, democratic groups, or civic organizations. Simply connecting these two types of groups through covert communications or anonymous liaisons will not suffice.

So what does this mean? How can something be "mass" if it is hidden? How can a



What Was the Black Liberation Army?

The origins of the Black Liberation Army (BLA) are contested. Most commentators agree on some basic facts: The BLA emerged in the early 1970s as a direct response to the systemic oppression and violent repression faced by Black communities in the united states. Born from the radicalized fringes of the Black Panther Party (BPP), the BLA was composed of militants who sought to dismantle the structures of white supremacy and capitalist exploitation through armed struggle. Rejecting the slow reforms of mainstream civil rights movements and the centralizing structure of the BPP, the BLA believed liberation could only be achieved through decisive, direct action—an armed confrontation with the forces of the racial state.

The BLA was a clandestine and decentralized organization. As repression of the Black revolutionary left, and of the militant New Left in general, became increasingly violent and desperate, some Panthers felt the Party's public orientation was no longer tenable. Chief among them were the Panther 21 defendants, most of whom lived in New York City. By 1970, at least 14 Panthers had been killed by police.

Throughout the 1970s, the BLA launched a series of bold, violent actions aimed at destabilizing the state. In 1971, they raided a New York City police station, seizing

stopped around 1970 and 1971. This is wrong. After the May 4, 1970 uprising, sparked by the killing of four students at Kent State, riots, rebellions, and community-led class combat continued. From 1970 to 1979 (and well into the 1980s), large-scale uprisings—broken windows, rock-throwing, burning barricades, looting, gun battles with the police, and tear gas—rocked cities across the country, driven by the same rage that had fueled the late 1960s. Radical groups in the counterculture, labor, feminist, and student movements remained active into the '70s. But, by 1971, after George Jackson's death and the Attica revolt, a clear pattern had emerged. The Weathermen, the Black Liberation Army, the George Jackson Brigade, and countless others turned their focus to sabotage, bombings, and political violence. We can hardly blame them for the impasses the liberation movements encountered. Many more retreated into spectatorship, cheering on, celebrating, or propagandizing around these actions from the sidelines, or else, criticizing them without charting alternate paths forward.

Let's briefly examine a few urban revolts that took place after Attica, without the clear involvement of organized militant groups. For this discussion, we'll exclude organized insurrections, standoffs, and raids—events like the Second Wounded Knee. We don't intend to cheapen or ignore these acts of organized militancy, but we want to focus on spontaneous uprisings, driven by unruly crowd dynamics—poor, racialized, and angry people acting without elaborate planning, coordination, or programs.

In February 1972, hundreds of Latinos in Pharr, Texas, rioted against police brutality, flipping cars and breaking windows. The police responded by firing on the crowd, killing one person. In April, Chicanos in Santa Paula, California, clashed with the police, using guns and Molotov cocktails. In May, over 200 arrests were made after thousands of anti-war protesters fought with police for hours in Gainesville, Florida. The following year, in April 1973, 10-year-old Clifford Glover was murdered by the NYPD in South Jamaica, Queens, catalyzing days of rioting. In response, the Weathermen bombed the 103rd precinct the next month. In 1974, racist riots broke out in Boston over school busing. Thousands of white students burned cars and threw stones at Black residents, who defended themselves in kind. In August 1975, after a white bar owner killed Black teenager Obie Wynn in Detroit, days of rioting followed near Livernois-Fenkell. In February 1976, Pensacola, Florida, erupted after high school students clashed over the Confederate Rebel mascot at Escambia County High School. When Chicago police killed two Puerto Ricans in June 1977, thousands in Humboldt Park fought the cops with Molotov cocktails and stones for two days. During the riots, The Fuerzas Armadas Liberación Nacional (FALN) bombed the Cook County government building, even before the fighting started. The events go on and on. Days of rioting and looting in NYC during the 1977 blackout. Widespread

The shift in strategy was first outlined in a document titled "A Message to the Black Movement." According to Yaki, the concept of "Rebuild" emerged from the realization that armed struggle had to be fully integrated with mass political organizing—not as an "armed wing," as the Panthers had envisioned, nor as an "armed nucleus" of the revolution, as the early BLA had believed. The "Rebuild" faction argued that the movement could not remain fragmented into isolated fronts—one clandestine, one mass; one armed, the other political. Both had to merge into a unified force.

Yaki argues that the failure of the BLA lay in their inability to build a mass underground movement capable of integrating both political and military tasks under the same banner.

Isolation Was Qualitative

As noted earlier, Yaki distinguishes between the BLA's isolation in terms of moral support and its strategic isolation as a political catalyst. While many, especially within Black communities, sympathized with and supported the BLA—offering shelter, public solidarity, and logistical help—their actions remained disconnected from the broader mass struggles that could have provided real force and meaning. The BLA failed to bridge the gap between guerrilla fighters and the larger revolutionary social movements. There was no clear path for meaningful participation, and their guerrilla tactics did not create a mass armed insurrection capable of toppling the u.s. government.

Like their counterparts in the Weathermen and the Black Panther Party, the BLA never developed a concrete relationship with the spontaneous riots, uprisings, and blockades that marked the late 1960s and 1970s. Instead, they viewed these phenomena with, at best, suspicion. Though these were pivotal moments of political violence and resistance, the BLA remained detached from them. Yaki doesn't address this gap in his essay, perhaps because, even by 1988, he had not fully recognized the political mistake it represented. Revolutionary action, in this context, required systematic and organized participation in large-scale social disaffection—which included riots, strikes, and uprisings.

The Riots Never Ended

Because many New Left groups shifted focus in the early 1970s—from mass revolt to organized subversion and sabotage—many today assume that riots and uprisings

weapons and ammunition. In Atlanta, a police officer was ambushed, and BLA militants took his badge and weapon. Over the next year, they executed several bank robberies to fund their operations. In 1972, the BLA ambushed police officers in Queens, New York, killing one and wounding several others. That same year, they bombed police stations and courthouses, targeting law enforcement and the judiciary

In 1973, the BLA enaged in a deadly shootout in San Francisco, killing two officers, then assassinated a police officer in Oakland. They also attempted a dramatic prison break, which ended in a shootout. Cells continued their attacks in 1974, bombing courthouses and orchestrating a successful jailbreak in Maryland to free Black Panthers and other radicals. In 1975, BLA commandos carried out another robbery and engaged in a violent shootout in St. Louis, killing and wounding several officers.

In 1979, the BLA liberated Assata Shakur from the NJ Clinton Correctional Facility for Women. As a result, several other members were eventually captured and sent to prison, including Sundiata Acoli, Sekou Odinga, Marilyn Buck, and Sylvia Baraldini; Shakur remains free, living in exile in Cuba to this day. By the end of the 1970s, despite their coordinated assault on state power, the BLA had been relentlessly pursued and crushed by the government.

Who Is Yaki?

James "Yaki" Sayles was born in Chicago in 1948. He was radicalized in prison, where he served time at Pontiac Penitentiary. While there, he joined a small Black nationalist group committed to organizing for revolution. The plan was simple: once released, they would reconnect and build a fighting force.

Upon his release, Yaki found himself immersed in the political currents of the Revolutionary Action Movement (RAM), the Republic of New Afrika, and the Black Panther Party. His loaylty remained with the prison group that had shaped him. In 1971, the revolutionary landscape Yaki inhabitated was deeply influenced by Amílcar Cabral's *The Revolution in Guinea* and Régis Debray's *Revolution in the Revolution?* Like many of his peers, these works became touchstones for understanding the political tasks of the moment. The lessons they drew from Debray, especially, played a key role in shaping their political and strategic outlook.

Their misinterpretations of these texts, along with the shortcomings of the texts themselves, proved disastrous for Yaki and his comrades. They derailed their efforts and, for many, destroyed their lives.

Yaki ran a BLA-aligned prison journal called *Vita Wa Watu*, meaning "People's War" in Swahili. In the journal's final issue, published in 1988 (Issue 12), Yaki featured a two-part essay titled "On What It Means to 'Rebuild': Looking Back." We will focus on Part 2 of the essay, as it offers valuable insights for the present, particularly regarding the organizational questions posed above.

Looking Back on "Looking Back"

Analyzing ideological missteps within the BLA

"*The BLA-CC became a vanguard without a rearguard, because it hadn't assumed total responsibility for the political as well as the military activity of the masses—just as it had left the sphere of providing a base for its own support... to forces outside its ranks.*"

"From the beginning, the BLA was beset with contradictions not only over ideology but over structural form. The definition of a 'politico-military' organization relates to both these areas and has always been approached by two opposing points of view."

Organizational and tactical proposals emerge from strategic ideology, which emerges from political conditions. Those who believe that tactics can be used at a certain juncture by groups or individuals "without a strategy" may be mistaken. The strategy of those who efuse to grapple with politics in a general sense is more grim than grandiose.

The animating premise of the BLA—to build the "armed front" without first building a party, to engage in militant tactics without waiting for a coherent strategy—was not a unique historical development, but rather an idea present throughout the world in the early '70s. This worldview remains extremely popular and may even be hegemonic within radical and militant circles globally. Yaki begins his analysis here, unsurprisingly, by connecting the BLA's early theories to the writings of Régis Debray. More specifically, he critiques their (incorrect) interpretation of Débray's "foco theory" as well as the context that gave that theory popularity: stategic collapse in the face of unrelenting repression.

By the early 1970s, the "entire movement was being forced underground," writes Yaki. Raids on offices, murders, beatings, and even massacres were increasingly used by the state against radical movements of the time, not just the BPP. The Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) had already fragmented completely. Most of the national leadership abandoned mass organizing in favor of a decade-long bombing campaign as the Weather Underground Organization (WUO). The Black Mask / Up Against

commitments to provide aid, recruits, an information. This dependence proved disastrous. The tragic outcome of Guevara's Bolivian campaign—his death and the destruction of the guerrilla nucleus—was recorded by survivors Pombo, Pereto, and Debray. Their reflections on ths campaign offer crucial insights into the failures of the rural strategy—insights that remain valuable for those studying the theory of armed struggle in Latin Amerika.

After Che's death, the strategy of armed guerrilla warfare shifted to the cities. Inspired by the ideas of Spanish anarchist exile Abraham Guillén, Cuba-aligned revolutionaries launched urban guerrilla operations in Uruguay, Argentina, and Brazil. The actions and writings of groups like the Tupamaros and figures like Carlos Marighella gained global traction. In the u.s., they were translated and republished in journals such as Leviathan, Radical Amerika, Monthly Review, and elsewhere. Their theories became a blueprint for revolutionary movements worldwide, influencing groups such as the Provisional Irish Republican Army, the Brigate Rosse, and the Red Army Faction. In the end, the urban guerrillas were even less successful than their rural counterparts.

In 1968-1969, as translators brought powerful stories and articles from Uruguay and Brazil to the English-speaking world, activists in the united states were searching for new ideas amid ever-mounting repression.

From "Build to Win" to "Rebuild"

"*The slogan 'Build to Win' was formed and used on the basis of particular internal and external, subjective and objective conditions. Those conditions no longer exist.*"

The Black Panther Party aimed to develop a secret armed wing to advance the political goals set by the organization. This approach aligned them with Moscow-supported Communist Parties worldwide, as well as with groups like APRA in Latin Amerika. In contrast, the Black Liberation Army (BLA) envisioned small urban guerrilla cells that would inspire the masses to form a revolutionary movement through their bold, heroic actions, much like their Latin Amerikan counterparts in Brazil and Uruguay. The phrase "Build to Win" encapsulated this approach, serving both as a guiding principle and a strategic assessment of their revolutionary path.

As conditions changed, some within the BLA recognized that their current strategy was failing. By the late 1970s, dozens of BLA participants were sitting in jail cells, and the entire movement was in retreat. This led a faction calling itself the Black Liberation Army - Coordinating Committee (BLA-CC) to revise their approach and adopt a new strategy under the banner of "Rebuild."

Rejection of Foquismo, Rise of the Urban Guerrillas

In the early 1960s, the u.s. developed new counter-insurgency strategies to combat rural-based guerrillas and quickly exported them to Latin Amerika. u.s. special forces conducted hundreds of counter-insurgency missions across the continent. In addition to providing air support and specialized training for u.s.-backed governments, the u.s. launched aid and propaganda programs targeting rural areas. These initiatives were carried out through political campaigns, USAID, and the Peace Corps.

By 1966, when the Black Panther Party was formed, the rural guerrilla struggles in Latin Amerika faced serious problems. Although each country was also victim to unique circumstances, in Argentina, Brazil, Peru, Colombia, Venezuela, the Dominican Republic, Ecuador, and Paraguay, rural focos failed to spark the revolutionary upheaval they had envisioned, whether against strongman regimes or "pseudo-democratic" neo-colonies. This was in no small part due to the inability of the guerrillas to understand the language, customs, and culture of the rural populations living where they operated. In Peru, for example, Hector Bejar remarks in his "Peru 1965: Notes on a Guerrilla Experience" that a large number of the Quechua peasants in Ayacucho did not speak Spanish, while many of the communist and socialist organizers of the time did not speak Quechua. This kind of oversight was common among the foquistas, since the subject of the revolutionary struggle they hoped to build were the guerrillas themselves. The surrounding populace, the terrain, the animals, plants, and precipitation rates were all treated ahistorically, as passive objects around which the heroic fighters must maneuver. These theoretical errors cost them dearly. One by one, the focos were rounded up, gunned down, and liquidated.

In response to these setbacks, Che Guevara proposed that only a "second Latin Amerikan war of independence" could effectively overthrow u.s. imperialism and build socialism.

To achieve this, Che sought to create a continent-wide strategy centered around a single "politico-military" nucleus in the rural heartlands of Ñancahuazú, Bolivia. He envisioned revolutionaries from across Latin Amerika joining his small band, receiving political and military training, and building a multi-front people's army spread throughout the continent. This army would operate independently of any single communist party or nationalist faction, which Che believed were no longer sufficient for the task of revolution.

Initially, Guevara's group relied on the support of Mario Monje's Bolivian Communist Party for basic logistical aid. This party vacillated continuously on its

the Wall! Motherfucker (BM/UAWM) group also left New York City to participate in armed resistance elsewhere. Sections of the Puerto Rican nationalist movement formed the Fuerzas Armadas de Liberación Nacional (FALN), a clandestine, cell-based organization. Many believed the mass structures of the preceding years were untenable in clandestinity and athat a new strategy, based completely in clandestinity, had to be developed. [*Editor: for more, read "The Student Intifada and the Coming Revolution,"* Radar *#1*.]

Yaki tells us that this was the context in which the BLA began conducting its actions. Whereas the Black Panther Party held offices, ran a newspaper, hosted press conferences, and organized demonstrations, the Black Liberation Army was a completely decentralized "front." Despite its name, it was never an army. It was never really an organization at all. To avoid police infiltration or assassination attempts, members formed "cells" consisting only of those with whom they had the utmost trust. There was no chain of command and no formal structure for decision-making. The BLA functionally lacked a unifying theory, logistics, or overarching plans.

Strategic Dissensus

According to Yaki, the BLA was "fighting a war" without a unified conception of who their allies were—or even what their goals were.

A significant part of their later confusion stemmed from their lack of ideological and strategic clarity. There was no consensus on whether they were fighting to build a New Afrikan republic in the Black Belt or to overthrow the us government and establish Black power across society. This division not only muddled their strategic vision but also weakened their organizational coherence. Without agreement on long-term objetives, their actions lacked direction and were unable to withstand the setbacks and difficulties that followed.

As repression continued to mount against left-wing movements, BLA commandos escalated their retaliation against the state, especially the police. The impressive and justified actions of the movement were not enough to curb the tidal wave crashing down on them, as responding to every attack on the movement would have required a large, resourceful organization—precisely the kind of thing the BLA set out to avoid.

Their only clear unity was tactical: build the armed front, attack the police, expropriate banks to fund the guerrilla war. This "tactical" mentality may be familiar to some militant organizers today. To some extent, contemporary movements have sought to make a virtue of necessity, actively celebrating and pursuing organizational and theoretical models that presume great disharmony and confusion. No surprise, then, that they must reinvent themselves every few years.

"*Repression of the movement ... was of a qualitative nature, demanding more than mere armed responses by an isolated section of the movement.*"

The Division between Political & Military Struggle

"We saw 'armed struggle' one-sidedly and superficially from a theoretical as well as structural standpoint. On the one hand, our tendency was to view armed struggle only in terms of armed actions, rather than as 'politics with bloodshed,' i.e., a political-social revolution employing armed forms of struggle as well as unarmed forms."

The BLA did not simply reject bourgeois political parties; they rejected the entire idea of the party—of a single unifying organization that would bring together collectives,

armed insurrection and the crucial role of a tightly organized rural base was one outcome of the split within Aprismo.

When the July 26 guerrillas successfuly seized power in January 1959, their focus on rural insurgency became a global blueprint. The conventional party model now faced serious competition within the international socialist movement.

With Grau's backing, a coalition of forces—socialist, Dominican exiles, Spanish Civil War veterans, and Cuban students—hatched a plan to strike against Rafael Trujillo, the u.s.-backed dictator of the Dominican Republic. Fidel Castro, one of the student leaders, took charge of a platoon for the mission. The group assembled for the assault, setting up training camps across Cuba before converging on Cayo Confites, the launch point for the attack. Arms, explosives, and fighters arrived from all corners—Argentina, New York City, wherever they could be smuggled in. The stage was set.

Under mounting pressure from the u.s. and the Dominican Republic, the expedition collapsed. Fidel Castro and his group, led by Juan Bosch, tried to press on, but they were unable to go at it alone. Rather than renouncing armed struggle altogether, Castro's frustration focused on how the Cayo Confites mission had been hastily conceived and then abandoned by Grau and the Auténtico Party. It wasn't the strategy that he condemned—it was the betrayal of it.

In 1952, just months before Cuba's scheduled presidential election, Fulgencio Batista staged a coup.

The Orthodox Party condemned Batista's coup, calling for resistance through civil means, legal action, and non-violence. The Cuban Communists, in contrast, were more lenient toward Batista and uncertain about opposing the coup. In response, Castro and other radical members of the Orthodox Party began organizing their own faction, complete with their own propaganda, and pushing for a revolutionary seizure of power. On July 26th, 1953, this group launched an attack on the Moncada military barracks in Santiago de Cuba. The plan was simple: seize arms and spark a nationwide revolt. It was a disaster. Soldiers killed dozens in the firefight. Some survivors fled to the mountains, hoping to establish a guerrilla base and rebuild their forces. Within a week, Batista had encircled and captured them.

The Moncadistas—Castro and his comrades—set about rebuilding their efforts in Mexico after their release from prison. There, they encountered Alberto Bayo—a veteran of the Spanish Civil War—and a young Argentine named Ernesto Guevara. Bayo, with his experience in rural guerrilla warfare from the fight against Franco in revolutionary Catalonia, trained the insurgents in his methods and theories.

With fresh insight and a refined strategy, they formed the July 26th Movement, named after their failed attack on the Moncada Barracks on July 26, 1953. Several children of the Spanish Republican exiles took up important positions within the group, including Camilo Cienfuegos and Haydée Santamaría. Their emphasis on

circles, groups, and individuals. They could not imagine an organization that operated in secrecy while simultaneously conducting both political and military actions. Instead, they believed that armed struggle could only occur independently of mass political movements. To protect themselves and others, they believed armed militants could rely only on a very loose network of guerrilla cells. Beyond a structural proposal, this perspective mistakenly treated tactics and "armed struggle" as entirely separate from other forms of politics.

This was a catastrophic strategic error. As Yaki puts it:

"*IN EFFECT, it was as if the Bolsheviks had said they'd build the armed front and let the Mensheviks build the mass front; as if Mao had said the CCP would build the armed front, and they'd let Chiang Kai-Shek and the Kuomintang build the mass front. There is no way to insure that armed actions will operate 'in conjunction with the rising militancy of the masses' unless the vanguard party—the politico-military organization—is leading and coordinating both 'fronts'/all forms of struggle.*"

The BLA had no shortage of moral support. Neighbors and civilians never betrayed their fighters to the police. But sympathy alone wasn't enough. Without a clear political strategy to turn that support into active participation, their efforts lacked the force needed for the "people's war" they envisioned. The believed the "armed front" would spark the revolutionary struggle's rebirth, but without the mass involvement required for such a transformation, their hopes were empty.

This should be a familiar pattern to some readers today. We might revise this section to add, "it would be as if the anarchists had said they'd build the armed front and let the liberals build the mass front."

The BLA in a Global Context

In the writings of Yaki, the Weathermen, the Panthers, and other militants of the time, one refrain echoes through reflections, interviews, and memoirs: "...and then we read *Revolution in the Revolution?* by Régis Debray..."

We don't want to overstate the book's influence on the events of the era, but no analysis of these groups is complete without understanding the spirit of the times that led so many young Amerikans to hold it in such regard. So, what was it?

Revolution in the Revolution? was released in 1967 and circulated at the Organization of Latin Amerikan Solidarity (OLAS) conference in Havana, Cuba. Among those in

attendance were Robert F. Williams, Kwame Ture, John Gerassi, Ted Gold, and a host of other US activists, joining thousands of socialists, communists, and organizers from across the hemisphere. Notably absent, however, were Che Guevara and the book's author, Régis Debray. The reason? Both were deep in the Bolivian jungle, in Ñancahuazú, laying the groundwork for an armed nucleus—or foco—to build the revolution in South Amerika.

In the months that followed, Debray's booklet was widely distributed throughout the Caribbean and Latin Amerika. Its ideas helped spark bold, controversial campaigns in Guatemala, Colombia, Venezuela, Peru, Argentina, Paraguay, Brazil, and Bolivia. A Fatah reading group in Beirut used it to develop armed PLO cadres, while fedayeen in the OIPFG in Iran studied it closely. So, what did the book propose? What arguments did it offer, and why did it resonate so strongly with those who read it?

What Was the Foco Theory?

In 1961, reflecting on the July 26th Movement's insurrectional campaign, Che Guevara wrote *Guerrilla Warfare*. The book outlined the theory, tactics, and strategy that had driven the Cuban Revolution. Though Guevera never used the term, his ideas came to be known as the Foco theory. These ideas were systematized at greater length by Régis Debray in his work *Revolution in the Revolution?* Early English translations retained the Spanish word "foco," meaning "focus," "spot," "source," or "nucleus."

The foco theory posits that a small group of guerrillas, by exploiting the strategic advantages of rural terrain, could evolve into a popular army and, ultimately, a proto-society that would challenge the state's legitimacy. The growth of this initial band would not depend on mass agitation or spontaneous struggles from unions, students, or civic movements—though Guevara and Régis Debray respected those efforts—but on military successes, on being "effective" in the course of their actions. This set Foco theory apart from conventional revolutionary models. The guerrilla band, in Guevara's view, would not be subordinate to a political party; it would be the Party itself in embryo, uniting both military and political power in a single structure.

Because Cuban guerrillas could not rely solely on the impenetrability of rural terrain, a strategy of mobility and clandestinity was essential to their success. Prematurely establishing a fixed base or occupying territory could force them into a defensive position, allowing the state to encircle and crush them. With its vast resources, the state could easily root out the rebels once they had consolidated defensible positions.

Proponents of foquismo asserted that the initial phase of secrecy and mobility was only temporary. The next phase would involve the expansion of defensible territory, the development of counter-power through independent infrastructure, and the incorporation of new forces into the revolutionary ranks. Across the world, communist and socialist parties denounced proponents of the foco theory for "anarchist deviationism."

How did the Cuban revolutionaries develop this strategy and theory? It emerged from their own experiences within the Latin Amerikan left. It stemmed from their membership in political parties and radical organizationst that always seemed to delay the real moment of confrontation. By examining the development of the foquista concept, we can understand why it would have appealed to young Black militants in the united states just a few years later.

Aprismo and the Pre-History of the Foco Concept

In 1924, Victor Raúl Haya de la Torre, a Peruvian political exile in Mexico City, founded the Amerikan Popular Revolutionary Alliance (APRA). Though he engaged with Marx and Lenin, he crafted a program tailored to Latin Amerika's unique needs. Haya de la Torre drew his main inspiration from the Mexican Revolution. APRA's core mission was clear: political sovereignty and economic dependence for Latin Amerikan nations, free from u.s. imperialism. For Haya de la Torre, this meant forging an alliance between the domestic petty-bourgeoisie and the peasantry—not just the proletariat. This pan-Amerikan anti-imperialist struggle would give rise to a new social order—neither capitalist nor socialist.

Could Communist parties, whether independent or controlled by Moscow, be trusted to seize revolutionary opportunities as they arose? Were their structures and ideologies capable of adapting to the shifting tides around them? Could they be relied upon to act in the people's interests? Apristas across the continent seemed to offer a solution to this uncertainty—but they, too, would collapse under the weight of these same dilemmas.

In 1934, the Partido Revolucionario Cubano – Auténtico (PRC-A), or the Auténticos, emerged under the influence of Victor Raúl Haya de la Torre, in opposition to Cuba's former dictator, Gerardo Machado. Fulgencio Batista, a sergeant in the Cuban military, also rose to power through the overthrow of Machado. Backed by the u.s., Batista would later govern Cuba. By 1944, the Auténticos had grown in strength, defeating Carlos Saladrigas Zayes (Batista's handpicked successor) in the polls and propelling Ramón Grau San Martín to the presidency.